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CAPITOL SPOTLIGHT
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ISRAELI HOSPITALS AND AMERICAN MARINES

The most puzzling aspect of the tragic bombing of the American Marines' headquarters in Beirut, was the stubborn unwillingness of the American authorities to accept Israel's help. Within minutes after the news of the disaster spread, Israel offered the United States the use of Rambam Hospital in Haifa. The Israelis offered also to come to Beirut immediately with elaborate equipment and specially trained rescue workers. Understandably, the Israelis had long ago made extensive preparations to deal with terrorist bombings.

The Israelis received no response to their offer. As the day wore on, Israeli Minister of Defense Moshe Arens made three separate phone calls to the highest level American officials he could reach. According to one report, Arens, formerly Israeli Ambassador to the United States, spoke directly with both Secretary of State George Shultz and Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger. Though we have not learned the details of these conversations, we know the American response was in the negative.

It is impossible to exaggerate the seriousness of the American decision to refuse Israeli aid. Rambam Hospital is a large, modern medical center whose staff includes internationally known burn specialists. Most important, the Haifa facility is about thirty minutes flying time from Beirut.

The option chosen by the Administration was to keep wounded Marines waiting eight hours for special medically-equipped U.S. planes to reach Beirut. Most of the injured men then had to endure a five-hour flight to Wiesbaden, West Germany. (Some Marines were flown to hospitals in Italy and Cyprus--both locations are much further than Haifa.)

For most of our seriously wounded Marines, more than twelve hours elapsed from the time of the explosion to the time of hospitalization.

I think it important that we note precisely what kind of assistance Israel could have given to rescue workers at the scene of the bombing.

The Israelis have perfected super-strong rubber cushioning which can be gently and slowly inflated to lift concrete and other heavy debris from victims' bodies. The Israelis have also pioneered phenomenally sensitive, tiny microphones which can be used to detect even the faintest sounds of human voices or breathing from beneath heaps of rubble.

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Finally, Israeli disaster preparation includes complex systems for getting life-saving oxygen to survivors in danger of death by suffocation.

What possible reason could the United States have had for denying wounded American Marines the fastest and most efficient rescue services available? We in Congress have made a good faith effort to have this question answered. Our minds have been open to the possibility that Israeli offers were refused for valid medical or security reasons. We could get no official response.

At this time, the only answer I have comes from an anonymous Pentagon source quoted in the New York Times on October 24. This nameless source said, "We didn't want to confuse the situation even further. By accepting Israeli assistance, we'd have infuriated the Arabs."

If this is really the reason behind the Administration's decision, every American has the right to be infuriated. I wonder how wounded Marines and their parents feel when they read that a life and death decision was made on the basis of petty, diplomatic protocol.

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